

Richard Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*,
and Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*
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In the annals of Western culture, few relationships have attained the fame and suffered the fortune as the one sustained for eight intense years between Richard Wagner, “opera’s prodigious innovator” (Gold 5) and Friedrich Nietzsche, philosophy’s transvaluator of values.¹ The accidents of history, however, are indeed strange, even in domains of music and philosophy where we find an intriguing analogue between Nietzsche’s fascination with Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde*, and Søren Kierkegaard’s passion for Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and his *Don Giovanni*. As Denis de Rougemont astutely points out,

It is curious to discover that Nietzsche, like Kierkegaard, begins his career as an author with a work on music, lyric tragedy, and myth: *The Birth of Tragedy*, which he publishes at the age of twenty-eight. At the same age, Kierkegaard writes *Either/Or*. And while the latter finds in Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* the perfect and unique expression of passionate spontaneity, the other swears by Wagner’s *Tristan* as an exemplary expression of myth and of dionysiac music (133-34).²

¹ Standard works on the relationship between these two men is Fischer-Dieskau’s *Wagner and Nietzsche* (1976), and R. Hollinrake’s *Nietzsche and Wagner, and the philosophy of pessimism*, 1982.

² De Rougemont continues this comparison with these observations: “Both [Nietzsche and Wagner] regard language as incapable of translating the essence of music, in which one sees the expression of sensual spontaneity, and the other the expression of the ‘dionysiac spirit,’ or orgiastic spontaneity. For both, ‘*only music*’ can express, in an immediate manner, the secret of Eros and its myths. But only music, too, can regenerate tragedy” (134; cf. 129). De Rougemont devotes an entire chapter of his profound *Love Declared* to the “Dialectic of the Myths” of Tristan and Don Juan, “the two most compelling myths to which the Western psyche is subject” (148), and their relationships to their respective protagonists Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. In this connection, it is interesting to note that Nietzsche never mentioned Mozart at all in *The Birth of Tragedy*, even though he did refer to him elsewhere with fondness and admiration, especially in his *The Wanderer and His Shadow* (1880; section 165) where he made a contrast between Mozart and Wagner neither of whom he believed expressed the Dionysian in music (from Kaufmann 100, note 2).

There is deep irony, however, reflected in the lives these two great thinkers and the substance of the mythic operas with which they were passionately consumed. Despite Kierkegaard's atomic attraction to the demonic in *Don Giovanni*, experientially he was the reverse of the paramour, and actually lived out the lost love of Tristan in his doomed relationship with Regine.³ And similarly, though Nietzsche was fascinated with the meaning of Wagner's *Tristan*, nonetheless, in his self-appointed quest to redeem the West from an approaching nihilism, he became a "Don Juan of knowledge." Given the loss of God, the question for him, as it was for the Don himself in his own context, was whether or not it was possible to make a commitment to or believe in anything at all. In a famous fable in *The Dawn* #327, Nietzsche wrote about a "Don Juan of knowledge" whose identity, no doubt, must have been none other than himself.

A fable.—The Don Juan of knowledge: no philosopher, no poet has as yet discovered him. He lacks love for the things he discovers, but he has wit and voluptuousness, and he delights in the intrigues of knowledge—which he pursues to the highest, remotest stars!—until finally there is nothing left for him to hunt, save what is absolutely painful in knowledge, like the drunkard who ends up drinking absinthe and *aqua fortis*. This is why he ends by desiring hell—it is the ultimate knowledge that seduces him. Perhaps it too will disappoint him, like everything he has known! Then he will have to stop for eternity, nailed to disappointment and himself transformed into the stone guest, and he will long for food on the night of his knowledge, though he will never eat again!— "For the

³ Regarding Kierkegaard's development of the theme of the demonic in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, it is interesting to note, as Fisher-Dieskau points out, that during "Easter 1863, Nietzsche even penned a two part-treatise on *The Demonic in Music*" (4). Presumably, this essay could be found in English in Oscar Levy's *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, originally published by Macmillan, 1909-11. In Kaufmann's opinion, however, "these translations, none of them by Dr. Levy himself, represent an immense labor of love but are thoroughly unreliable" (691).

whole world of things will not spare a single mouthful for this starveling” (quoted in de Rougemont; cf. also Heller 15).

The irony, again, in all this is the surprising reversal of Kierkegaard’s and Nietzsche’s mythic alter ego, paradoxically Wagner’s *Tristan* for Kierkegaard and Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* for Nietzsche. As de Rougemont put it, “Both accede, one by Mozart and the other by Wagner, to the core of the myth which by themselves they could only dream of, which their persons refuse, and which is their Shadow” (112).

Having dealt in an earlier essay with Kierkegaard’s interpretation of Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*, in this paper I will seek to sketch the contours of Friedrich Nietzsche’s early work *The Birth of Tragedy*. In this book, Nietzsche details his support for Richard Wagner’s comprehensive project for music-drama, and also presents his own reflections on opera, Wagner’s work *Tristan and Isolde* in particular. In the process of this discussion, I also intend to show that Nietzsche’s advocacy of Wagner’s project was largely fired by religious motivations. I will begin with a treatment of Wagner’s theory of opera which is the necessary background for understanding Nietzsche’s agenda in *The Birth of Tragedy*.

“No musician, perhaps no artist in the history of Western art, has ever had so much to say about his own life, works, and ideas as did Richard Wagner” (Goldman and Sprinchorn 11). Indeed, he was an artist with a vision, a vision of what art ought to be, music-drama in particular. He assiduously went about setting forth his theories in books of dense, cumbersome prose, and then sought to incarnate his principles in his own musical compositions.⁴ His most prodigious literary activity came after he had

⁴ Of his writing style, Magee writes: “He writes like an autodidact, with flowery expressions, a vocabulary intended to impress, unnecessary abstractions, and elaborate sentence structures. . . . One forms the conviction that the prose was improvised, poured out without forethought or discipline—that when Wagner embarked on each individual sentence he had no idea how it was going to end. Many passages are intolerably boring. Some do not mean anything at all. It always calls for sustained effort from the reader to pick out meaning in the cloud of words. Often one has to go on

completed *Lohengrin* in 1847 at the age of thirty-four until the time he was about forty when he began composing the music for *The Ring*. During this six year period, he produced a bevy of books the most important of which were *The Work of Art of the Future* (1849), *Opera and Drama* (1850-'51),⁵ and *A Message to my Friends* (1851). In these texts and others, Wagner championed an entirely new, revolutionary theory of opera which found embodiment in his remaining works of *The Ring*, *Tristan and Isolde*, *The Mastersingers*, and *Parsifal*. Wagner's new programme, which some believe was most successfully incorporated into *Tristan*, has had enormous influence down to this present time.⁶ I will seek to survey the basic features of his proposal below.⁷

reading for several pages before beginning to descry what, like a solid figure emerging from a mist, it is he is saying" (4). No wonder Magee begins these observations by saying "I must say, . . . , that anyone who wants to avoid reading Wagner's prose has my sympathy." For a similar opinion of Wagner's prose writing, see the extended comments by Goldman and Sprinchorn, pages 13-16.

⁵ One of the most important books on opera in the second half of the twentieth century was written by Joseph Kerman and was entitled *Opera as Drama* (1956; revised edition 1988) after Wagner's own work. On the first page of the first chapter, Kerman writes: "I make no apology for the Wagnerian title. This book is far from Wagnerian, but the point of view it develops is really the basic one celebrated by *Oper und Drama*, Wagner's chief theoretical statement and the important opera tract of his time. The view is trite, but always freshly suggestive: that opera is properly a musical form of drama, with its own individual dignity and force. Now, what Wagner said over and above this amounts to a very great deal, and gives his writing its particularity, and grows more and more insupportable as the years pass. What remains is his violent championship of the old tautology, opera as drama. Wagner's operas and his writings forced the nineteenth century, and the twentieth, to approach opera with a new high-mindedness. No one has ever pleaded the cause so efficiently" (1).

⁶ Wagner's influence at a mechanical level has been noted by Edward J. Dent in these words: "We owe it to Wagner that the auditorium is darkened as a matter of course during a performance, that the doors are shut and latecomers [are] made to wait outside; we owe it to him that a soft prelude is heard in silence, and applause [is] reserved for the end of an act. Wagner invented the steam curtain; steam was released from a row of jets along the line of floodlights, which gave it whatever colour was desired. . . . Another Wagnerian innovation was the use of scenery that moved sideways. . . . It is entirely to Wagner's initiative that we owe the modern developments of stage machinery. It was he who started the outlook on orchestral music which has led to the modern idolisation of the star conductor" (quoted in Magee 56).

In Wagner's opinion, the high watermark of human artistic genius and creativity was accomplished in the domain of ancient Greek tragedy. He substantiated this assertion on the basis of the five following reasons. First, Greek tragedy entailed the successful deployment of multiple arts—poetry, drama, costumes, mime, instrumental music, dance, song, etc.—and because of this conglomeration, Greek tragedy had greater scope and expressive power than did any of the arts individually. Second, it took its subject-matter from *myth* which enlightens human nature and experience at the deepest level, and does so in a universal and exhaustive manner. Third, both the content of the drama itself and the occasion for its performance were spiritually motivated and thus possessed religious significance. Fourth, the spiritual significance of Greek tragedy, however, was humanistic rather than theistic, a celebration of *human* life and its importance in *this* world. Fifth, the entire community of the Greek city-state took part in these celebrated performances.

Greek tragedy was the ideal art form because it was comprehensive or all embracing: it included virtually all the arts; it expounded upon universal themes; it included the whole population. Greek tragedy, in other words, was the microcosmic representation of the whole of life.

The triumph of Greek tragedy, unfortunately according to Wagner, was only temporary. The various arts began to develop independently of one another—instrumental music was performed without words, poetry was expressed without music, drama was produced without the benefit of either music or poetry. Furthermore, with

⁷ Goldman and Sprinchorn (1964) have put together a compendium of Wagner's prose works which present in an orderly fashion the composer's revolutionary ideas on opera under the following headings: Part One-Cultural Decadence of the Nineteenth Century; Part Two-The Greek Ideal; Part Three-The Origins of Modern Opera, Drama, and Music; Part Four-The Artwork of the Future (Wagner's project). In addition, they also include texts devoted to Wagner's personal development, the art of performance, Beyreuth, and his views on politics. The present survey of Wagner's challenge to traditional opera theory is drawn from Magee (5-7).

the advent of the Christian religion, the subject matter of drama switched from its celebration of the myths about man to provincial Christian themes. And not only this, but the interpretation of Christianity that had gained ascendancy in Europe was extremely ascetic—world, life, and humanity denying—and therefore severely *anti-artistic* in attitude. Magee offers this summary of Wagner’s understanding of the nature of Christianity and its artistic consequences which he held at this point in his career. For him, Christianity was . . .

a religion that divided man against himself, teaching him to look on his body with shame, his emotions with suspicion, sensuality with fear, sexual love with feelings of guilt. This life, it taught, is a burden, this world a vale of tears, our endurance of which will be rewarded at death, which is the gateway to eternal bliss. In effect, this religion was, as it was bound to be, anti-art. The alienation of man from his own nature, especially his emotional nature; the all-pervading hypocrisy to which this gave rise throughout the Christian era; the devaluation of life and the world and hence, inevitably, their wonderfulness; the conception of man as being not a god but a worm, and a guilty one at that; all this is profoundly at odds with the very nature and existence of art. Such a religion, based as it is on a celebration of death and on hostility to the emotions, repudiates both the creative impulse and its subject matter. Art is the celebration of life, and the exploration of life in all its aspects. If life is unimportant—merely a diminutive prelude to the real Life that is to begin with death—then art can be of only negligible importance too (6).⁸

⁸ Wagner’s feelings about the anti-artistic implications of Christianity found a particularly poignant expression in a feisty essay written in 1849 entitled “Art and Revolution” which was a hostile attack on Christianity and its doctrines of humility and extreme otherworldliness. According to Wagner, Christianity was responsible for the weak and slave like culture of the masses (intimations of Nietzsche may be seen here), and for the hypocrisy and greed of the exploiters of the masses. He also held Christianity responsible for having taken away the strength, beauty, dignity, and

Art had made a consistent descent from its pinnacle in ancient Greek tragedy to the rock bottom valley of cultural decadence and degeneracy in Wagner's own nineteenth century. Art was no longer a religious activity portraying profound themes celebrated by the entire community, but had become no more than barbaric entertainment for exhausted business men and their wives or mistresses. Modern art was silly, contentless, and expressed nothing more sophisticated than the shallow mentality of middle-class Christian society. Sadly enough, this cultural deterioration found its greatest embodiment in nineteenth-century opera. No one, neither artist nor audience, seemed to mind the fact that opera's methods were grotesque, its plots superficial, its libretti mindless. Opera existed, it seemed according to Wagner, for no other purpose than as an excuse for catchy tunes, stage extravaganzas, and displays of vocal dexterity by celebrity singers. Despite this despicable state of affairs, opera for Wagner still remained the highest of all art forms because, like Greek tragedies of old, it incorporated all of the arts, and was capable of presenting the sublime themes of human experience to a gathering of the entire community for ultimately metaphysical purposes.

Consequently, as might be expected, Wagner called for a revolution in opera. His lofty vision was no mere attempt simply to resurrect the triumph of ancient Greek tragedy, but rather to go beyond it in every way possible. Opera, for him, should become the comprehensive art form incorporating all the resources of drama, poetry, music, song, dance, costumes, scenery; it would recover and re-present the timeless themes about the deepest things in human experience; it would be far more than an evening of superficial entertainment, but rather would be a gathering of the entire community for seemingly religio-transcendent purposes. Such should be the ambition of the "artist of the future," and this, of course, was none other than Wagner himself, a

freedom of life—all those things necessary for a sophisticated culture, and an art of distinction (from Flaccus 78-79).

self-styled artistic messiah who could draw together all the achievements of a Shakespeare and a Beethoven into a single art form preferably called “music drama.”⁹

This new form of music drama would be substantively different from the more recent, traditional versions of opera. The Wagnerian music drama would focus not on what goes on outside of or between people, but rather would concentrate on the internal aspects of a character, especially the emotions (just as romanticism would have it!). Music drama would investigate the ultimate nature of inner reality, namely the dramatic transactions of the human heart and soul. Myth was the ideal vehicle for this expression since it deals with archetypal situations irrespective of time and place. Finally, according to Wagner’s plan, there would also have to be a reverse in the older operatic hierarchy in which the drama itself was the mere means, and music the ultimate end of the performance. Rather, music was to be ancillary to the drama—music the means, and drama the end. Thus for Wagner, “the object of music drama was the presentation of archetypal situations *as experienced by the participants*, and to this dramatic end music was a means, albeit a uniquely expressive one” (Magee 8-9; italics his).

Such is the basic outline of Wagner’s revolutionary theory of “music-drama.” Even after a century and a half, his ideas are still at the heart of the conversation over opera theory today. As Edward Dent believes,

Wagner, through his writings and through his own personal influence, has converted the musical world, or a good part of it, to something like a new outlook on music in general. It may be that he was mistaken in supposing that the modern

⁹ These ideas point out the centrality of the motif of redemption in Wagner’s program about which Nietzsche himself wrote in his acrimonious *The Case of Wagner*: “The problem of redemption is certainly a venerable problem. There is nothing about which Wagner has thought more deeply than redemption: his opera is the opera of redemption. Somebody or other always wants to be redeemed in his work: sometimes a little male, sometimes a little female—this is *his* problem.—And how richly he varies the motif!” (160; underlining mine).

world could ever recover the attitude of ancient Greece to the religious aspect of musical drama, but he certainly induced it to take music, and especially opera, far more seriously than it had ever done before (quoted in Magee 15-16).

Certainly one admirer who was readily converted to Wagner's view of music and his radical programme of operatic reform was a young professor of philology at the University of Basel, Friedrich Nietzsche. The fatherless Nietzsche found in Wagner, who was the same age as his deceased father, not only a surrogate parent, but also a mentor who shared his passion for music, his devotion to classical Greece, and his embrace of Schopenhauerian philosophy. Their celebrated friendship began in 1868 and lasted until the Autumn of 1876.¹⁰ It has come to stand, with support from Kierkegaard's admiration for Mozart, for the affinity that can exist between the disciplines of music and philosophy. Philosophy and music were joined for a very brief time when the "Gadfly" of Athens, awaiting death in prison, was responsive to a haunting dream that urged him thusly: "Socrates: make music." Apart from dry, detached philosophical treatments of music, however, cultural history had to wait until the arrival of Friedrich Nietzsche in whom "the world obtained a thinker for whom music became the dominant experience in life. Artistic and cerebral creation were one and the same in his person. For it was as a musician that he began his career" (Fisher-Dieskau 1).¹¹

¹⁰ Fisher-Dieskau recounts the "final meeting" between these two men in chapter ten of his book *Wagner and Nietzsche* (151-55). However, as Martin van Amerongen warns, the received tradition regarding the exact details of how the two giants of Western culture went their separate ways is actually "an apocryphal account of an apocrypha account" (55). See his *Wagner: A Case History* for details (45-55).

¹¹ Fischer-Dieskau begins his work on Nietzsche and Wagner with a chronicle about the former's childhood encounter with music and his growing desire to be a composer and musician. "Nietzsche's love of music" he tells us, "actually started when he was eight. Aroused by some special fluke," . . . "if one can call it that, those efforts of the excited child to commit harmonizing and consecutive notes to paper and sing out Biblical texts with a fanciful accompaniment on the piano" (2). Indeed, the author believes that ". . . Wagner's great appeal to, and influence on, Nietzsche are tightly interwoven with the philosopher's ambitions as a composer" (Preface). Chessick provides further insight into Nietzsche as a musician and composer with this comment.

And for the philosopher/musician himself, music itself became the *ancilla* or handmaiden of philosophy, as he pondered how music serves as the muse of thought itself: “Has it been noticed that music liberates the spirit? gives wings to thought? that one becomes more of a philosopher the more one becomes a musician?” (CW 158).¹²

There is no doubt, then, that Nietzsche and Wagner were admirably suited for each other. As their relationship progressed, and Nietzsche became an increasingly devoted “Wagnerite,” he began working on his first major book on the subject of Greek tragedy. While Nietzsche wrote the book under the philosophic influence of Arthur Schopenhauer, nonetheless he was dominated in its composition by the spirit of Richard Wagner to whom he dedicated the work as his “highly respected friend” (BT 31).¹³ “Eventually,” as Elsner points out, “*The Birth* became Nietzsche’s offering to the [Wagnerian] movement. The final product merged classical scholarship with Wagnerite themes” (16).¹⁴

“Nietzsche played the piano and all his life (until insanity) he improvised on it for hours; he wanted to be a composer and he composed. There is a huge book of his compositions available in university libraries, but nothing commercially available has been recorded. He also sang and composed songs. Probably his best-known musical work is the Manfred Meditation. Nietzsche thought very highly of himself as a musician but he wrote music just like his prose; in other words he defied every rule of composition and tonal connection, he made many mistakes in harmonics, and so forth, and he never developed a consistent theme throughout his pieces; everything is variations and changes. In his music he reaches for *Rausch*, an untranslatable word, which means a kind of frenzy, an ecstasy, an intoxication. It is interesting that Nietzsche’s father was also a musician and composed; both father and son would improvise for hours together on the piano” (27).

¹² CW = *The Case of Wagner*. Music as the muse of thought is the theme of this quote by Bishop Beveridge, a 17th century English divine: “It [music] calls in my spirits, composes my thoughts, delights my ear, recreates my mind, and so not only fits me for after business, but fills my heart, and the present, with pure and useful thoughts; so that when music sounds the sweetliest in my ears, truth commonly flows clearest into my mind” (from *The New Dictionary of Thoughts*, p. 413, emphasis added).

¹³ BT = *The Birth of Tragedy*.

¹⁴ In his introductory comments to *The Birth of Tragedy*, Kaufman, believes that the work, despite its faults which Nietzsche himself clearly recognized and wrote about in his 1886 essay “Attempt at Self-Criticism,” is immensely important for at least three

It is not difficult to see how Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, published in the same year that the foundation stone was laid for Wagner's Festival Theatre in Bayreuth (1872), served as a propaganda piece for his operatic revolution. The essential premises of Wagner's proposed metamorphosis for opera find substantial repetition and development in Nietzsche's own heady treatise. Young's summary of *The Birth of Tragedy* should help us to see the obvious connection.

If one attempted to summarize the essence of its complex argument the following might be offered. We stand in need of a solution to the suffering and absurdity of life. The Greeks found such a solution in the art of their great tragedians. Our

reasons. First, it is "one of the most suggestive and influential studies of tragedy ever written. Perhaps only Aristotle's *Poetics* excels it." Second, its importance lies in the fact that it "does not only deal with tragedy—not only with tragedy and with Wagner: it also deals with the relation of art to science, with the whole phenomenon of Greek civilization, and with the modern age." In reflecting on Socrates and music, Nietzsche wrote, "Perhaps there is a realm of wisdom from which the logician is exiled [like Socrates]. Perhaps art is even a necessary correlative of, and supplement for science" (*BT* 93). Finally, *The Birth* is significant in the context of Nietzsche's entire literary achievement in that it shows a marked contrast to his later, more mature works. "But much of *The Birth of Tragedy* is badly overwritten, and murky" Kaufmann believes, ". . . and occasionally a more extreme contrast to his later style—both literary and philosophical—would be difficult to imagine" (3-4). *The Birth of Tragedy* does not reflect by any means Nietzsche's final thoughts about art and aesthetics. Julian Young believes that "Nietzsche's thought about art (indeed, his philosophy in general) may be divided up into four sharply contrasting periods: an early period centred on *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872); a 'positivistic' period centred on *Human, All-too-Human* (1878); the period of *The Gay Science* (1882-7) and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-6); and his last year before the onset of madness, 1888, the central work of which is *Twilight of the Idols*. (It must be added, however, that this opinion, as with almost everything to do with Nietzsche, is highly controversial.)" (1992b: 303). Now, despite the fact that Nietzsche, in his book *Human, All-too-Human*, jettisons the prophylactic power of art, and embraces a positivistic "socratism" (materialistic natural science) as the hope of the world, he nonetheless seems to return to the rudiments of his original aesthetic outlook at the end of his life. In Young's opinion, "There is . . . a cyclical quality to Nietzsche's thought about art: at the end of his career, as at the beginning, he offers us not merely the beautiful but also the sublime as solutions to the problem of living: not merely the transfiguration of the world of individuals, but also its transcendence" (1992b: 306).

only hope for a solution—given the untenability of Christianity in the modern age—lies in the rebirth of such art in the music-dramas of Richard Wagner (25).

Hence, both Wagner and Nietzsche seem to share something of a “creation-fall-redemption” schema when it comes to their respective programs. For Wagner, in the beginning there was Greek tragedy and art was at its apex. Western man fell from this aesthetic paradise under several malevolent influences, including the dehumanizing and anti-artistic tendencies of Christianity. Redemption was available through his own music-dramas which could restore the essential elements of the Greek tragedies, and even go beyond them in salvific potency. The center for this redemptive activity is Bayreuth, the city of Wagner, which may be seen as a kind of center for artistic amelioration amidst the decadent culture of the nineteenth century.

For Nietzsche, there was the original creation of Greek tragedy which had come about by the fusion on stage of Apollonian and Dionysian elements in Greek culture. It was by means of Greek tragedy, so constituted, that the Greeks themselves were able to blunt the edge of the terrors of life. But the rationalism and scientism of Socrates (hence, Socratism) overthrew the ruling spirit of Greek tragedy, and it fell. Redemption has been unavailable from that time until the present. If the Germans, in line with the ancient Greeks, are going to find a way to cope with a nihilistic nineteenth century world on the brink of chaos, then they must rehabilitate Greek tragedy as this art form has re-emerged in the music-dramas of Richard Wagner, especially his *Tristan and Isolde*. Nietzsche’s concern for a new kind of redemption, however, seems to be more comprehensive in scope than Wagner’s aesthetic version. Indeed, for Nietzsche, his schema seems necessary to sustain not only individual human lives, but the whole of civilization itself. In this sense Nietzsche, “a philosopher and warrior for a new culture” (Elsner 21), presents it as a new *Weltanschauung* whose purpose is restore to humanity its ultimate metaphysical activity and purpose which is art.

At this point, I would like to set forth five salient themes abstracted from the content of *The Birth of Tragedy* which will demonstrate Nietzsche's support of the Wagnerian agenda. The first theme is that *only through art can we overcome the terror of existence*. Nietzsche had observed that, "The Greek knew and felt the terror and horror of existence" (BT 42), but what he evidently sought to convey by this phrase was not just the random, merciless experiences of disease, death, and disaster which we all experience; rather for him "the terror and horror" of things connoted the specter of pessimism and the threat of the abyss of nihilism. The encounter with purposelessness leads to the kind of depressing wish expressed in this epigram of Silenus: "What is best is utterly beyond your reach: not to be born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*. But the second best for you is—to die soon" (BT 42). Indeed, the experience of everyday reality as it enters consciousness results in an action paralyzing nausea, and an attempt at a buddhistic negation of the will. Knowledge of the truth about the nihilistic nature of reality, in other words, leads to resignation and inaction.

But how can such pathological states be overcome? The answer, Nietzsche said, is found in ART! "Here, when the danger to his will is greatest, *art* approaches as a saving sorceress, expert at healing. She alone knows how to turn these nauseous thoughts about the horror or absurdity of existence into notions with which one can live" (BT 60). Indeed, "art saves him, and through art—life" (BT 59). For, "the truly serious task of art— [is] to save the eye from gazing into the horrors of night and to deliver the subject by the healing balm of illusion from the spasms of the agitations of the will . . ." (BT 118). For reasons such as these, Nietzsche earnestly believed that in the absence of Christianity, "it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally justified" (BT 52). For Nietzsche then, art is the only rationale for life, the truly metaphysical activity of humanity, and the ground of hope. One, however, cannot help but wonder whether or not the aesthetic is metaphysically and spiritually adequate to

sustain the entire life of man, and to retard the threat of nihilism. Aestheticism may indeed turn out to be a false god, and an idol that leads to destruction.

But for Nietzsche it was not just any old art that fulfills this sublime soteriological function, for as the second theme suggests, *the Greeks addressed the terrors of life and existence by means of Attic tragedy which resulted from a fusion of the Apollonian and Dionysian elements of Hellenic aesthetic culture*. In the following description, Nietzsche noted that Attic tragedy is the miraculous offspring of the union of the Apollonian and Dionysian despite the cultural dialectic that existed between them.

Through Apollo and Dionysus, the two art deities of the Greeks, we come to recognize that in the Greek world there existed a tremendous opposition, in origin and aims, between the Apollonian art of sculpture, and the nonimagistic, Dionysian art of music. These two different tendencies run parallel to each other, for the most part openly at variance; and they continually incite each other to new and more powerful births, which perpetuate an antagonism, only superficially reconciled by the common term “art”; till eventually, by a metaphysical miracle of the Hellenic “will”, they appear coupled with each other, and through this coupling ultimately generate an equally Dionysian and Apollonian form of art—Attic tragedy (*BT 33*).

By the term “Apollonian,” Nietzsche referred to the non-musical arts or the plastic arts concerned with the beautiful representation of phenomenal appearance. By the word “Dionysian,” Nietzsche meant music in its role of representing not external appearance, but reality itself, the metaphysical thing-in-itself, or the “will” in Schopenhauer’s metaphysics.¹⁵ As Young points out, “according to the birth-of-tragedy thesis

¹⁵ At this point, Nietzsche is drawing directly on Schopenhauer’s aesthetics for his interpretation of the nature of Dionysian music. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, he includes an extensive quotation from his mentor’s work to prove his point. Here is the significant excerpt on the nature of music as Schopenhauer wrote them: “For, as we have said, music is distinguished from all the other arts by the fact that it is not a copy of the

great art must consist in some kind of synthesis (a synthesis . . . in which the Dionysian ‘predominates’) between the beautiful representation of phenomenal reality—primarily, one assumes Nietzsche to hold, by means of speech and action—[the Apollonian] and music [the Dionysian]” (35).

But *exactly* how does this alloy of the Apollonian and the Dionysian in Greek tragedy deliver us from the terror of existence? Nietzsche’s thought at this point seems vague, but perhaps its basic thrust is the following. Whereas Apollonian art tries to convince us of the joy of existence by the glorification of phenomenal reality, Dionysian art and the Greek tragedy “teaches us that we are to seek this joy not in phenomena but behind them” for “a metaphysical comfort tears us momentarily from the bustle of the changing figures. We are really for a brief moment primordial being itself. . . .” (104). By piercing through the Kantian phenomenon of appearance represented by the plastic arts in which we might be tempted to rest and take delight, there is the possibility of pressing onward by means of the mediator of Dionysian music to gain access to reality itself, the veritable *Ding an sich*. When this contact is made, the mystical occurs, namely a sense of ontological identification with ultimate reality itself, an identification which presumably rejuvenates the spirit and enables the metaphysical initiate to return to life substantively refreshed. Dionysian music, in other words, is the means by which one is allured to depart from a cave of pessimistic appearances into the light and life of the sun of ultimate reality musically revealed. Dionysus together with the contribution of Apollo redeem humanity from its existential plight.

Though Greek tragedy came into existence through the union of Apollonian and Dionysian elements, it “died” through the elimination of the Dionysian from Greek drama

phenomenon, or, more accurately, of the adequate objectivity of the will, but an immediate copy of the will itself, and therefore complements everything physical in the world and every phenomenon by representing what is metaphysical, the thing in itself. We might, therefore, just as well call the world embodied music as embodied will. . . .” (*BT* 102).

at the hands of Euripides acting under the influence of the epistemology of Socrates. Hence the third thesis is that *the art of Greek tragedy was wrecked by means of Socratism which was characterized by a dialectical desire for theoretic knowledge and the optimism of science in its attempts at a mastery of the phenomena of the world.* “Socratism,” as Nietzsche called it, was roughly equated with rationalism, scientism, and optimism. Along with Euripides, Socrates substituted explanation, discussion, and dialectic for the artistic and aesthetic thereby engendering the death of tragedy by means of the spirit of reason. At the same time Nietzsche recognized the value and benefit of “Socratism” in its attempted mastery of the world that made life possible, that is, the contribution of science to human life. Socratic, scientific man, however, is non-artistic man, and this non-aesthetic approach to life is a denial of his true metaphysical nature, and results in spiritual destitution, for, as Nietzsche repeatedly affirmed, “it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally justified” (BT 52).

A non-artistic society dominated by the Socratic ethos is in terrible metaphysical and aesthetic trouble. Unfortunately this attitude of mind which had come not only to dominate Greece also spread its dark shadow throughout Western Europe only to reach Nietzsche’s own time and place where it had reached epidemic proportions. He knew it as “modernity.” But Nietzsche, with astounding pre-vision, set forth a veritable “postmodern” critique of the barrenness of Socratic, scientific, secular modernity desperately in need of Dionysian artistic redemption. Indeed, since God was dead, and Christianity was no longer an option, the aesthetic took center-stage in his postmodern alternative, at least in *The Birth of Tragedy*.¹⁶

What is astounding to recognize, however, is that for Nietzsche, as he spells it out in *The Birth of Tragedy* (section 19), nineteenth century *opera* was the paradigm

¹⁶ On the relationship between Nietzsche and the postmodern, see *Nietzsche as Postmodernist: Essays Pro and Con* (1990) edited by Clayton Koelb.

matic embodiment and reflection of the deadening Socratic spirit which had given birth to what Nietzsche called “Alexandrian” culture (i.e., scientific, technological culture). Though for different reasons, both he and Wagner were exceedingly disgusted with the opera of their day, and here is Nietzsche’s line of reasoning which led him to this perspective.¹⁷

He began by acknowledging the Socratic spirit which had created the bane of contemporary Alexandrian culture. “Our whole modern world,” he notes, “is entangled in the net of Alexandrian culture [characterized by the achievements of scientists and scholars]. It proposes as its ideal the theoretical man equipped with the greatest forces of knowledge, and laboring in the service of science, whose archetype and progenitor is Socrates” (*BT* 110). Where does this approach to life express itself most fully and faithfully? Paradoxically, in the very place where one would least suspect it given the Dionysian source of its own origin, namely *in opera!* “We cannot indicate the innermost modern content of this Socratic culture more distinctly than by calling it *the culture of the opera*: for it is in this department that this culture has expressed its aims and perceptions with special naïveté which is surprising when we compare the genesis of opera and the facts of operatic development with the eternal truths of the Apollonian and Dionysian” (*BT* 114).

How was it that opera, rooted in Apollo and Dionysus, had become the embodiment of the Socratic, non-Dionysian ideals of modernity? Nietzsche suggested at least three reasons why this happened, none of which are particularly transparent. First of

¹⁷ Nietzsche also believed that modern, decadent opera had also infected modern music such that it was no longer able to fulfill its genuine metaphysical, or Dionysian function. He wrote: “Closely observed, this fatal influence of the opera on music is seen to coincide exactly with the universal development of modern music; the optimism lurking in the genesis of the opera and in the character of the culture thereby represented, has, with alarming rapidity, succeeded in divesting music of its Dionysian-cosmic mission and impressing on it a playfully formal and pleasurable character: a change comparable to the metamorphosis of the Aeschylean [tragic] man into the cheerful [Socratic] Alexandrian” (119).

all, according to Nietzsche, modern opera developed and presented an interpretation of humanity answering to modernity's need for the idyllic, but one that was far from the model of man found in ancient Greek tragedy. For Nietzsche, this was especially seen in the creation of the *stilo rappresentivo* and the recitative which reflected that desired perfection. According to him, modernity possessed a powerful yearning "for the idyllic, [for the] the faith in the primordial existence of the artistic and good man. The recitative was regarded as the rediscovered language of this primitive man; [and] opera as the rediscovered country of this idyllic or heroically good creature. . . ." (BT 115). His primary point may be summarized in this manner: that over against the pre-modern Christian view of man as inherently corrupt and lost, the modern inventors of opera via its art forms presented "the optimistic glorification of man as such, in the conception of the primitive man as the man naturally good and artistic. . . ." (BT 116). But opera's version of man is idyllic and modern, not tragic, and is therefore insufficient for the rebirth of the tragic for which Nietzsche and Wagner were calling.

The second reason why Nietzsche argued that opera was based on the same principles as Alexandrian culture is because "opera is the birth of the theoretical man, the critical layman, not of the artist" (BT 116). This is especially seen in modern opera's demand that the words, the symbol of the Socratic man, are sovereign over the music, the symbol of the tragic, Dionysian man. Nietzsche's own description of this situation is colorful: in modern opera, he said: "text-word lords it over counterpoint like master over servant" (BT 116). But textual sovereignty is the mark of the inartistic man and is very much unlike the true Dionysian who only can appreciate the real meaning of music. As Nietzsche puts it, "Because he [inartistic man] does not sense the Dionysian depth of music, he changes his musical taste into an appreciation of the understandable word-and-tone-rhetoric of the passions in the *stilo rappresentivo*, and into the voluptuousness of the arts of song" (BT 116-17). Conditions such as this, from

Nietzsche's point of view, certainly were not conducive to the rebirth of tragedy in which a genuine understanding of the primordial nature of pure music was required.

The third and final reason why Nietzsche believed that opera in his age reflected the spirit of Socratic world view was because of the "idyllic tendency of the opera" itself, especially in its excessively optimistic view of humanity (*BT 117*). Rooted in the mythos of some primitive and paradisaical state that present-day man was somehow to emulate and recover, modern opera developed its unrealistic view of human nature in the context of theoretical culture, a phenomenon that is "solely to be explained by the comforting belief, that 'man-in-himself' is the eternally virtuous hero of the opera, the eternally piping or singing shepherd, who must always in the end rediscover himself as such, should he ever at any time have really lost himself" (*BT 118*). But for Nietzsche, this outlook on humanity was the fruit of modern optimism which rises from the very depth of the Socratic world view. How far this was from the authentic and tragic view of man! It was nothing more substantial than the shallow optimism of modernity in operatic dress, far from the elegiac sorrow of an eternal loss, and the terrible seriousness of true nature which is the substance of ancient tragedy (*BT 118*). With regard to such slimy optimism, Nietzsche had but one response: "Away with the phantom!" (*BT 118*).

But what else could be expected from opera since it originated in the Socratic context, entirely outside of the genuine aesthetic province. It could do nothing other than "degenerate under the influence of its idyllic seductions and Alexandrian flatteries to become [as Wagner had said] an empty and merely distracting diversion" (*BT 118*).

Hence, Nietzsche, like Wagner and their philosophic forebear Schopenhauer, found modern opera decadent, and in desperate need of redemption. Thus, the fourth theme is *that in the midst of a decadent nineteenth century Socratic culture, there was a great need for the rebirth of tragedy and the Dionysian spirit in its authentic Greek form*

and this was to be found primarily in the music-dramas of Richard Wagner.¹⁸ In this vein, Nietzsche's words of challenge were: "Only dare to be tragic men" (BT 124). The reason, of course, for this exhortation is that only tragedy has that tremendous power which stimulates, purifies, and discharges the whole of life. Only when encountered directly is tragedy's dynamic understood, and healing experienced. As Nietzsche put it, "We cannot begin to sense its highest value until it confronts us, as it did the Greeks, as the quintessence of all prophylactic powers of healing, as the mediator that worked among the strongest and in themselves most fatal qualities of the people" (BT 125). Thus, there had to be a "*gradual reawakening of the Dionysian spirit* in our modern world!" (BT 119). Consequently Nietzsche called for the rebirth of the German myth under the jurisdiction of "our luminous guides, the Greeks" (BT 137), and for the rebirth of German music in its authentic Dionysian spirit which he had already seen rising in Bach, Beethoven, and in the master himself—Richard Wagner. He writes:

Out of the Dionysian root of the German spirit a power has arisen which, having nothing in common with the primitive conditions of Socratic culture, can neither be explained nor excused by it, but which is rather felt by this culture as something terribly inexplicable and overwhelmingly hostile—*German music* as we

¹⁸ Kaufmann believes that not only was the world to look to Richard Wagner and his music-dramas as the source of hope, but also to Nietzsche himself as an "artistic Socrates" who would synthesize the elements of critical thought and art. He states what he thinks Nietzsche implied in *The Birth of Tragedy* in these words: "Apollo and Dionysus reached a new synthesis in tragedy; this synthesis was negated by Socrates; and now another synthesis is wanted, an artistic Socrates. Could Plato be meant? On the contrary. . . . The 'artistic Socrates' is Nietzsche himself. He looks forward to a philosophy that admits the tragic aspect of life, as the Greek poets did, but does not sacrifice the critical intellect; a philosophy that denies Socrates' optimistic faith that knowledge and virtue and happiness are, as it were, Siamese triplets; a philosophy as sharply critical as Socrates' but able and willing to avail itself of the visions and resources of art" (12). This was Nietzsche's own vision, and something only he, or others like him, could achieve.

must understand it, particularly in its vast solar orbit from Bach to Beethoven, from Beethoven to Wagner (*BT* 119).¹⁹

The reference to the name of Wagner here signals the real intention of Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* and Young states it accurately: "The fundamental purpose of *The Birth* . . . is to argue not the greatness of Greek tragedy but rather that we have, finally, another instance of the pattern of greatness first exemplified in the works of Sophocles and Aeschylus—the music-drama of Richard Wagner. Hence, Nietzsche holds, though our culture is "Socratic," devoid of the Dionysian, we can yet hope for its regeneration through the music which is to sound from Beyreuth" (31).

For Nietzsche personally, *the hope for the rebirth of tragedy was crystallized in the quintessential Wagnerian opera Tristan and Isolde*.²⁰ This fifth theme rooted in Niet

¹⁹ In much more poetic style, Nietzsche expressed the same conviction in this way: "In the opera, just as in the abstract character of our mythless existence, in an art degenerated to mere entertainment as well as in a life guided by concepts, the inartistic as well as life-consuming nature of Socratic optimism had revealed itself to us. Yet we were comforted by indications that nevertheless in some inaccessible abyss the German spirit still rests and dreams, undestroyed, in glorious health, profundity, and Dionysian strength, like a knight sunk in slumber; and from this abyss the Dionysian song rises to our ears to let us know that this German knight is still dreaming his primordial Dionysian myth in blissfully serious visions" (142; italics added).

²⁰ For lengthy discussion of the Tristan myth, see de Rougemont (1963), Eisner (1969), Schoepperle and Loomis (1960). The plot of Wagner's adaptation of the legend is summarized in many places including Weston's, *The Legends of the Wagner Dramas*, from which the following is taken. *Act One*: Tristan, the nephew of King Mark of Cornwall, has slain the Irish champion Morold, and freed Cornwall from the tax imposed by Ireland. To seal the peace between the two kingdoms, Isolde, the princess of Ireland, once betrothed to Morold, is to wed King Mark, and the drama opens on her voyage to Cornwall, under the security of Tristan. Isolde, who considers the terms of the treaty an insult to her country, is bitterly resentful of her position and plight. She is not only unwilling to marry King Mark, but is unconsciously in love with Tristan, whom as the minstrel Tantris, she had healed of the wound inflicted by Morold. She believes herself to be still wanting to avenge the death of her former betrothed, and resolves to terminate the situation she is in by poisoning both herself and Tristan in a cup, ostensibly of reconciliation, which she offers him at the termination of her voyage to Cornwall. Her servant, Brangäne, aware of her intentions, endeavors to frustrate her attempts at murder and suicide, and substitutes for the poison a love potion. The result is that Tristan and Isolde fall in love, and declare their passion for one another even as

zsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* is developed in a variety of references to the opera found in the sections sixteen through twenty-five in the latter part of the book (see especially section 21). "It was *Tristan*," according to Fisher-Dieskau, "that helped young Nietzsche confront the Dionysian, forcing him to think about those aspects [of art]. In the heady and orgiastic language of *Tristan*, woe seemed to conjure up weal, and weal woe" (63).

The opera, written off and on by Wagner during the years 1857-59, was based on Gottfried von Strassburg's thirteenth century epic poem on the Tristan theme which historically had focused on the fusion of love and death. It is a spiritually compelling subject, and as Kerman suggests, it possessed far more meaning than a simple human love story. He writes "That *Tristan und Isolde* is much more than a love story is only too evident. The extraordinary conception slowly and surely grips the audience: love is not merely an urgent force in life, but the compelling higher reality of our spiritual universe. The essential action of the opera is that the lovers are drawn more and more powerfully to perceive this reality and submit to it" (160). Even Wagner himself, despite the fact that he was having an affair with Mathilde Wesendonk when he wrote the piece (Magee 47), testifies to the spiritual experience which accompanied its composition: "When I gave myself up to *Tristan*," Wagner wrote, "I immersed myself in the proudest depths of spirit and fashioned the outer semblance of the work from the center of that inner world.

King Mark arrives to claim his bride in Isolde. *Act Two*: Here the new lovers utilize an opportunity for love making in the palace garden by a midnight hunt undertaken by King Mark, where at day break they are surprised by the King led by Tristan's treacherous friend Melot who has planned the hunt with the intention of surprising the lovers. Tristan draws his sword on the traitor, and falls mortally wounded. *Act Three*: In this act, Tristan has been transported by his faithful servant Kurwenal, to his own castle in Brittany, where he lies wounded to death, and is waiting with impatience for the coming of Isolde whom Kurwenal has summoned to his aid. Isolde arrives, but too late to save the life of Tristan who dies at the joy of her arrival. King Mark, who has learned from Brangäne the secret of the love potion, follows Isolde with the intention of letting her remain with Tristan, but his landing is opposed by Kurnewal who slays Melot, and is mortally wounded himself. The King arrives only to find Tristan dead, and to hear the death-song of Isolde as she dies on the body of her lover (296-97).

Here in my music-drama, *Life and Death*, the whole meaning and experience of the outer world depend entirely on the hidden mysteries of the spirit life” (Helene 129). For reasons such as these Nietzsche found it particularly compelling, and he spoke of it in the most exalted terms. “*Tristan and Isolde*,” he said, “the real *opus metaphysicum* of all art. . . insatiable and sweet craving for the secrets of night and death. . . overpowering in its simple grandeur” (quoted in Elsner 15). The overture to the work seemed particularly spellbinding to him as he explained to his friend Erwin Rohde in a letter dated October 1868: “I simply cannot bring myself to remain critically aloof from this music; every nerve in me is atwilt, and it has been a long time since I had such a lasting sense of ecstasy as with this overture” (quoted in Fisher-Dieskau 6). Nietzsche’s fascination with *Tristan* actually began when he was only sixteen years old, for at that time, he and the other members of his *Germania Debating Society* united their resources in order to purchase a copy of the piano score of *Tristan and Isolde*. Even after his break with Wagner, *Tristan* was the single exception to his vicious pronouncements on the music of his former friend. Recalling his boyhood passion, he said, “Even now I am still in search of a work which exercises such a dangerous fascination, such a spine-tingling and blissful infinity as *Tristan*—I have sought in vain, in every art” (quoted in van Amerongen 47). Thus, it would seem that for Nietzsche at least, he had found redemption in this significant work of Wagner’s, and like a good evangelist, he wanted to share his good news, his aesthetic gospel, his belief in his musical messiah with the world. Thus it is cogent to argue that Nietzsche the atheist presented his entire Wagnerian project in *The Birth of Tragedy* as an offering to the world out of deeply religious motivations.

Nietzsche, of course, is universally known for having announced to the modern world that “GOD IS DEAD.” Nietzsche in the nineteenth century brought to a perverse conclusion a line of religious thought and experience that began with Jesus and continued on in the personalities of St. Paul, St. Augustine, St. Thomas, Pascal,

Kierkegaard, and Dostoevsky among many others. Nietzsche earnestly believed that the death of God was the greatest event in modern history, and the cause of extreme danger (Heller 3). This fact was at the very center of Nietzsche's own spiritual existence, and it engendered in him both joy and exhilaration and as well as great angst and despair. Though he was the prophetic mouthpiece of the death of God, the modern Diogenes whose lantern failed to turn up God, it would be a grave mistake to regard Nietzsche as thoroughly irreligious. As Heller reminds us, Nietzsche was "by the very texture of his soul and mind, one of the most radically religious natures that the nineteenth century brought forth. . .". At the same time, however, he was "endowed with an intellect which guards, with the aggressive jealousy of a watchdog, all the approaches to the temple" (11). He began his duties as modernity's religious watchdog even with the writing of *The Birth of Tragedy*. In reflecting on the substance of this book almost fifteen years after its original publication in his essay *An Attempt at Self-Criticism* (1886), he expressed the fact that as he understood it, Christianity, by virtue of its unmitigated emphasis on morality, was so thoroughly life- and art-denying that it could not qualify in any way, shape or form as an acceptable religious alternative for modern man. This fact, he said, is the reason why it he passed it over in hostile silence in his text. Because of the significance of this statement revealing Nietzsche's attitudes toward Christianity and his understanding of its approach to morality, life and art, I will quote it at length.

Perhaps the depth of this *antimoral* propensity is best inferred from the careful and hostile silence with which Christianity is treated throughout the whole book—Christianity as the most prodigal elaboration of the moral theme to which humanity has ever been subjected. In truth, nothing could be more opposed to the purely aesthetic interpretation and justification of the world which are taught in this book than the Christian teaching, which is, and wants to be, *only* moral and which relegates art, *every* art, to the realm of lies; with its absolute stan

dards, beginning with the truthfulness of God, it negates, judges, and damns art. Behind this mode of thought and evaluation, which must be hostile to art if it is at all genuine, I never fail to sense *hostility to life*—a furious, vengeful antipathy to life itself: for all of life is based on semblance, art, deception, points of view, and the necessity of perspectives and error. Christianity was from the beginning, essentially and fundamentally, life's nausea and disgust with life, merely concealed behind, masked by, dressed up as, faith in "another" or "better" life. Hatred of "the world," condemnation of the passions, fear of beauty and sensuality, a beyond invented the better to slander this life, at bottom a craving for the nothing, for the end, for respite, for "the sabbath of sabbaths"—all this always struck me, no less than the unconditional will of Christianity to recognize *only* moral values, as the most dangerous and uncanny form of all possible forms of a "will to decline"—at the very least a sign of abysmal sickness, weariness, discouragement, exhaustion, and the impoverishment of life. For, confronted with morality (especially Christian, or unconditional, morality), life *must* continually and inevitably be in the wrong, because life *is* something essentially amoral—and eventually, crushed by the weight of contempt and the eternal NO, life *must* then be felt to be unworthy of desire and altogether worthless. Morality itself—how now? might not morality be "a will to negate life," a secret instinct of annihilation, a principle of decay, diminution, and slander—the beginning of the end? Hence, the danger of dangers?

It was *against* morality that my instinct turned with this questionable book, long ago; it was an instinct that aligned itself with life and that discovered for itself a fundamentally opposite doctrine and valuation of life—purely artistic and *anti-Christian*. What to call it? As a philologist and man of words I baptized it, not without taking some liberty—for who could claim to know the rightful name of the Antichrist?—in the name of a Greek god: I called it Dionysian." (BT 24).

A couple of important points need to be made about this diatribe of Nietzsche's. First of all, in Nietzsche's estimation, strict, absolute morality and life are antithetical, and since Christianity is obsessed with morality, it too is antithetical to life. But whatever is antithetical to life is of necessity antithetical to art, since art glories in life and seeks to depict it. Christianity, therefore, by this chain of reasoning, is absolutely unacceptable to Nietzsche because it denies both life and therefore art. Second, in light of Nietzsche's rejection of Christianity, it would seem that he proposes his metaphysics of aesthetics as its substitute. This was necessary not only because of Christianity's antipathy to art and life, but also, and more importantly, because God was dead. What would take his place? What could help humanity confront the terrors of life, now that the theological comfort of the ages is no longer available? Nietzsche's answer, as I pointed out early on, is art, the art of the ancient Greek tragic theatre, and especially the rebirth of this art form in the music-dramas of Richard Wagner, the new musical messiah.

Young has also recognized the religious thrust of Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* and has explained it under the conception of the theatre as a surrogate church. In his words,

That *The Birth* has religion as its fundamental concern, that it seeks to find through art—through “art deification”—something to fill the void left by the demise of Christian God is manifested in its account of the role of the tragic theatre in Greek life—an account which . . . is supposed to provide a model for the regeneration of modern culture. The Greek theatre, he says, had the function of “stimulating, purifying, and discharging the whole life of the people (*BT* 21). . . . In so describing it, he transforms Greek theatre (and demands the same status for Wagnerian theatre) into, in all but name, a church, a church which possesses the centrality to social life possessed by the church of medieval Christendom,

and which fulfills the same function of providing metaphysical consolation for the horrors of human life (49).

What numbers were to Pythagoras, art was to Nietzsche: at least at this stage in his life, art was his religion. And the same must also be said for Richard Wagner himself, at least until he began his eleventh hour pilgrimage in the direction of Christianity.²¹ Be that as it may, what is certain is that Wagner and Nietzsche in tandem formed an alliance by which they hoped to turn the world upside down. Together they offered the world a new vision for the meaning of life: the answer was in the musical arts which beatifically leads the soul into Dionysian redemption. What a shame these two men parted company forever over irreconcilable differences on that chilly autumn day in 1876 in Sorrento.²² Fisher-Dieskau describes their final departure in quiet tones:

²¹ Alan David Aberbach's book length treatment of Wagner's religious and spiritual ideas concludes by noting "That he [Wagner] toiled sometimes painfully, to achieve spirituality is undeniable; but, whether he ultimately achieved success in his spiritual quest is more problematic. Although he spent a considerable portion of his life struggling to find the right path, one will never know whether or not he found it" (221).

²² What were the reasons that led to the break-up between Nietzsche and Wagner? In his *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* article, Walter Kaufmann suggests three reasons for this event. First, as Nietzsche himself had said in *The Case of Wagner*, "one cannot serve two masters, when one is called Wagner." Because Wagner seemed to exercise an oppressive and restrictive stronghold on Nietzsche in both personal and professional ways, "in order to come into his own, Nietzsche had to break with Wagner" (5: 508). Second, Nietzsche became increasingly disturbed about Wagner's growing anti-French and anti-Semitic outlooks (on Wagner's anti-Semitism, see Jacob Katz, *The Darker Side of Genius: Richard Wagner's Anti-Semitism*, 1986). When Wagner moved to Beyreuth and set up his theatre center there and became a source of significant socio-cultural influence, Nietzsche had to take a stand and separate from his beloved mentor. Third was the exchange between Wagner and Nietzsche of their respective works *Parsifal* and *Human, All-too-Human*. Nietzsche felt betrayed by Wagner that in *Parsifal*, the self-styled modern Aeschylus and Schopenhauerian atheist could celebrate the anti-Greek ideal of pure foolishness, and use Christianity in the process for theatrical effects. Wagner was outraged by Nietzsche's book which bore a motto from Descartes and a dedication to Voltaire. In Kaufmann's words, ". . . Nietzsche's development from Schopenhauer to Voltaire and from essays with romantic overtones to aphorisms after French models, as well as his abandonment of nationalism for the ideal of the 'good European,' were at least as unforgivable from Wagner's point of view as *Parsifal* was from Nietzsche's" (508). From his text *Nietzsche Contra Wagner*,

“During that Sorrento stroll, the Master was lively, chatty, and imaginative, just as his friend had once admired him. But now Nietzsche’s response was one of a defensive silence. He immediately excused himself and walked through the twilight. The two men never saw one another again” (155).²³ Thus the realms of philosophy and music were

Nietzsche himself explained “How I Broke Away from Wagner.” The two reasons cited here are Wagner’s anti-Semitism and his embrace of Christianity. “By the summer of 1876, during the time of the first *Festspiele*, I said farewell to Wagner in my heart. I suffer not ambiguity; and since Wagner had moved to Germany, he had condescended step by step to everything I despise—even to anti-Semitism. It was indeed high time to say farewell: soon after, I received the proof. Richard Wagner, apparently most triumphant, but in truth a decaying and despairing decadent, suddenly sank down helpless, and broken, before the Christian cross” (676). One rather strange account attributes their break-up to a particular event that transpired between the two men which has been documented in a Wagner biography written by Julius Kapp. According to this account, Wagner wrote a confidential letter to Nietzsche’s doctor suggesting that the latter’s poor health was attributable to his excessive masturbation, for which he recommended cold water treatment as a possible cure. Allegedly, Wagner’s “perfidy” and “moral insults” in this regard, as Nietzsche called it, was the catalyst to their parting of the ways (from Van Amerongen 50-51).

²³ This description of Nietzsche’s separation from Wagner is certainly a mild understatement if there ever was one. In the years that followed, Nietzsche declared war on Wagner, and set forth his anti-Wagnerian campaign in a series of three works, *Richard Wagner at Bayreuth* (the last of the four *Untimely Meditations*, published in 1876); *The Case of Wagner: A Musician’s Problem-Turinese Letter of May 1888* (this work is a sustained and vitriolic criticism of Nietzsche’s former hero, published in 1888); *Nietzsche Contra Wagner: Out of the Files of a Psychologist* (completed on Christmas day, 1888, just two weeks before his mental collapse; this book was a compilation of previous selected passages collected by Nietzsche to show that *The Case of Wagner* had not been inspired by sudden malice as Kaufmann says, but that he had taken his stand over against his former friend for considerable periods of time; published in 1895).

Phrases such as the following in *The Case of Wagner* convey the tone Nietzsche assumed toward Wagner in this work. Wagner was one of Nietzsche’s sicknesses (155), having been a corrupted Wagnerian (160); Wagner is harmful (156), and the most impolite genius in the world (157); Wagner has made everything, including music, sick (164); he increases exhaustion, and his art is sick (166); he is a neurosis (166); Wagner was not a musician (172), and his music is bad, perhaps the worst ever made (173); in his music there is little to chew on (174). In the Postscript to *The Case of Wagner*, entitled *The Price We Are Paying for Wagner*, Nietzsche said that one pays heavily for being one of Wagner’s disciples, and that only recently had the Germans shed a kind of fear of him, and felt “the itch to be rid of him” (181-82). For indeed, he had spoiled the German’s taste for the arts, especially opera (183), and was bad for the youth (185). No wonder, then, that Nietzsche in *Nietzsche Contra Wagner* said that in

unable to keep company after all, and the world for this reason has been very much the worse. For science needs the arts and the arts need science just as the mind needs the heart and the heart needs the mind.

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relation to him: "we are antipodes" (680). Like unrefrigerated milk, this relationship had gone deeply sour and putrefied, but from one psycho-analytic perspective, Nietzsche's antipathy for Wagner, as for Jesus Christ himself, was really borne of deep affection: "Dr. Wilhelm Stekel . . . believes that the philosopher in fact coveted the Master and that he did so behind Cosima's back. His violent rejection of Wagner . . . is therefore pure affection. 'Christ was his hero, not Dionysus. Has one ever seen a Dionysian who was a vegetarian, who did not drink and who avoided women?'" (quoted in Van Amerongen 51).

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